

## When Your Adolescent Needs Help

All youth need daily support and guidance. But some young people whose adolescence is marked by more serious struggles may require help from outside the family. Many people believe that family matters should be kept private. Seeking help, however, simply means that you are drawing on every community resource that you can to support your child. It is never too late to reach out for help. But early intervention with young people who are troubled is crucial to reducing the damage that problems, or the resulting acting-out behavior, might cause. Watch for these signs that your child might need help in dealing with the difficulties of adolescence:

★Large amounts of time spent alone, and isolation from family and friends ...★Sudden changes in school performance ...★Drastic mood swings or changes in behavior...★Changes in your child's peer group or separation from long-time friends ...★Lack of interest in hobbies or social and recreational activities

Keep in mind that these signs do not always mean that your adolescent is in trouble. Some changes in friendships, for example, are normal as young people mature and find new interests. Changes in the family situation, such as moving to a new town, also can affect adolescent behavior as they deal with leaving friends and joining a new school. Also, all young people are different. An introverted youth, for example, may enjoy spending time alone reading. On the other hand, an extroverted young person may have trouble focusing on school in the less structured academic situations of most middle or junior high schools. Parents usually can best assess how their children are doing on the basis of experience. Yet during adolescence, youth often stop sharing as much information with their parents as they did at younger ages.

The first step for parents in dealing with concerns about their adolescents, therefore, is to improve or reopen the lines of communication. Simply talking with adolescents, without focusing on immediate concerns, gives young people the chance to share their struggles or provide reassurance that they are comfortable and doing well. If problems appear to persist and your child seems reluctant or unable to discuss them with you, try talking with him or her in a nonconfrontational manner about the changes that you notice. Express your concern for your child's well-being and your interest in helping in any way possible. But be prepared for a defensive reaction, and listen and ask questions. Be willing to help your adolescent talk through problems, rather than immediately giving solutions.

If your efforts to talk with your child do not appear to be working, you might get an outside perspective from a close and trusted friend or relative. You also can seek support and guidance on dealing with your teen through other community resources:

- Health care professionals, guidance counselors, teachers, or the principal at your child's school
- Your local government, which may offer service to families through a range of social service agencies (You can find the telephone numbers for local government agencies in your phone book. Look for agencies with the following key words: youth, families, mental health, social services, human services, or crisis intervention. Many local governments also have an Information and Referral line that you can call for help in finding the right services.)
- Your local chapter of the United Way, which typically funds social service programs in communities
- Community organizations that offer services to young people and their families (Look in the Yellow Pages under "Youth Organizations" or "Youth Centers.")
- The social work or social service department of a local hospital, especially a children's hospital
- The employee assistance program at your workplace



- Parent support groups or parenting education classes that address parenting issues or specific issues such as adolescent drug use
- Independent counselors and psychologists in your area (Look in the Yellow Pages under "Psychologists" or "Therapists.")

In addition, a good way to help your adolescent through troubled times is to focus on yourself. By improving your ability to cope with the effects of your adolescent's changing behavior, you make it more likely that you will be able to help your child. Seeking help for yourself also shifts the focus away from your adolescent, who may feel exposed and vulnerable under the sudden scrutiny of a range of outsiders. By looking for help for yourself, you are modeling good coping skills and learning new tools for dealing with stress. Perhaps most importantly, you are reassuring your adolescent that the family works through its difficult times without blaming any family member.

**Making the Most of Available Resources...** Most social service agencies or helping organizations offer valuable services. Generally, their staff truly care about helping you and your adolescent. Not all agencies, however, may offer the services that you need. Some also may have a style of offering services that may not be comfortable for you or your family. So it is important, even in crisis, that you treat the selection of an agency to assist you as you would any other important consumer decision, such as buying a car or a house. Look at a number of options and ask agencies questions such as the following:

- Could you describe the philosophy of the agency regarding working with adolescents and their families?

(Most youth professionals believe that services to young people should address the total needs of your child. An agency with such a "holistic" approach to helping your child will offer health care, counseling, recreation, and family support, either directly or by referral to other agencies. To be effective, these services should help young people develop a sense of belonging, give them chances to master skills and tasks, assist them in learning how to make choices about their future, and support their efforts to contribute to the community.)

- Could you describe the services you offer (type, where offered, length of time services are available)?
- What is the makeup of your staff (for example, racial/ethnic background, gender, and education and experience level)?
- Are there other community agencies that can share their perspective with me about the work of your agency with young people and their families?
- What is expected of my child and me if we participate in your services or program (for example, time and contractual obligations)?
- If we are assigned to work with one of your staff with whom we do not feel comfortable, would we be able to request a change?
- Will all information on my child's case be held confidential?
- What would you do if your staff appeared unable to help my child or me?
- How soon could we access the services (is there a waiting list)?
- What is the cost of the services?
- Is any financial assistance available to help with this cost (for example, Medicaid)?
- What do I do next if I would like to have my child receive these services?

Keep detailed notes on every contact that you make. These notes should include the name of staff people with whom you speak, what they tell you, whether they are sending more information in the mail, how you felt about the interaction, and the date. You can use the information later to choose the agency that seems most appropriate.

You may run into obstacles while seeking assistance for your child. Occasionally, for example, you may speak with someone who does not appear to fully understand the issues facing you and your child. Or you might find yourself being referred from agency to agency. At these times, get support and advice from friends and relatives. They can help you view such obstacles for what they are: "bumps in the road" on the way to finding help rather than dead ends. Your persistence will pay off when you find services that meet the needs of your family.

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